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Consideration and adoption of the report of the Committee to the General Assembly at its fifty-seventh session

Draft report

Chapter III
General debate

1. Statements in the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee on Information: Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Benin, China, Costa Rica (on behalf of the Rio Group), Cuba, Democratic People's Republic of Korea, Egypt, Ghana, Guyana, India, Indonesia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Jamaica (on behalf of the Caribbean Community), Japan, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Monaco, Morocco, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Senegal, Spain (on behalf of the European Union), Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Ukraine, United Republic of Tanzania, United States of America, Venezuela (on behalf of the Group of 77) and Yemen.

2. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, many speakers said that they attached great importance to the commemoration of World Press Freedom Day, which this year would be observed on 2 May. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a large group, spoke of the freedom of expression as a universal right that "knows no borders" and stressed that an independent media was crucial in building democracy. His group condemned acts of violence "to silence journalists", or to suppress and distort information, and mourned the journalists who had given their lives in the line of duty. These views were shared by a number of other delegations.

3. All speakers in the general debate pointed to the critical role of information in development and the achievement of social justice. A number spoke of the bitter contradiction inherent in the fact that astounding advances in information and communication technologies were serving to deepen the digital divide between the developed and the developing countries. One delegation said that, unfortunately, the real concern for a vast majority of the world's peoples was not the latest software but, rather, the bread to live. Many Committee members emphasized the continuing

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importance of the establishment of a new world information and communications order which was based on the free and balanced flow of information. One delegation said that some countries used the mass media to distort the reality of developing countries.

4. In the view of many speakers, the United Nations as a whole, and the Department of Public Information in particular, had an essential role to play in seeking to bridge that digital divide. They spoke of the urgent need to harness information technology for the equal benefit of all people everywhere, in keeping with the goals of the Millennium Declaration. Many agreed that the technology was especially important for the African continent. One speaker said that it was essential that the focus be on "needy customers", which were the developing countries. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a large group, said that the United Nations had indeed begun to address the role of information and communications technology in development and to examine how to make all countries part of that "irreversible process". That speaker, and another delegation on behalf of a group, pointed to the importance of the upcoming World Summit on the Information Society. In this connection, one speaker in particular praised the Secretary-General for the establishment of the United Nations Information Technology Service, the Health InterNetwork and the Information and Communications Technology Task Force.

5. All delegations strongly supported the Secretary-General's commitment to enhanced communications as a key element in the reform and revitalization of the United Nations in a new information age, and to developing a culture of communications within the Organization. In this connection, one delegation said that it was unfortunate that cuts in the programme budget for upgrading equipment in 2002-2003 would affect the ability of the United Nations to carry out its information dissemination activities, and that, accordingly, adequate resources should be provided to the Department of Public Information to implement its current and future programmes.

6. All speakers agreed that the Department of Public Information was the "voice" of the United Nations, and that its principal goal was to raise the level of popular awareness of the Organization's aims and activities, and build broad-based support for its work. One delegation characterized the Department as "the umbilical cord" that tied the Organization to the outside world. The general view expressed by delegations was that a clear relationship should be established between the Secretary-General's road map for the millennium development goals and the programmes of the Department.

7. Many speakers were of the opinion that the Secretary-General's comprehensive review of the management and operations of the Department of Public Information, as called for by the General Assembly in resolution 56/253 of 24 December 2001, should aim at strengthening the role of the Department, and not diminishing it, and should focus on its relevant and mandated functions. One delegation emphasized the need for the Department to consult with the Member States in the review process, especially those that were the developing countries.

8. A number of delegations pointed to the important role of the Committee on Information in determining the information and communications policies for the Organization. In that connection, one delegation "regretted deeply" the divisiveness and "extremist positions" in other committees which aimed to circumvent the Committee. Another speaker said that it would be seeking the Committee's support

for adopting language reasserting the role of the Committee as the main subsidiary body mandated to make recommendations relating to the work of the Department.

9. A number of delegations cautioned that budgetary considerations alone should not determine the continuing provision of long-established activities and services to Member States. They were of the view that the Committee must first examine the Secretary-General's comprehensive review of the Department before a decision was taken in any other forum. One Committee member said that the review should not be considered from "the principal angle of financial considerations", since the political importance and beneficial results which derived from the Department's activities were factors to be considered above all others. One delegation said that reform must not become "a hostage to finance". One speaker maintained that some activities had "intangible benefits", for example the exhibits in the public lobby, and, for those, alternate sources of financing could be sought. In this regard, another pointed to the benefits of the travelling exhibits in particular.

10. All Committee members expressed strong support for the Interim Head of the Department of Public Information and for the work that he was carrying out to further strengthen the communications function within the Organization. Committee members recognized that the report of the Secretary-General on the reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of public information and communications (A/AC.198/2002/2) was the main focus of the debate, and acknowledged that it was a sound basis for deliberations. In principle, all delegations supported the strengthening of the Department and the broad directions being contemplated to improve its efficiency. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a large group, suggested that the Department could benefit from a reorganization of its activities to ensure the efficient utilization of limited resources. One speaker pledged his country's support for the Department's efforts to better position itself to more effectively carry out its mandates in an "ever-changing information environment", and also noted at the same time that mandates should be reviewed on a regular basis. Another suggested that "clear-headed proposals", such as the one pertaining to the Cartography Section, should be addressed. One delegation found the proposals to eliminate services "alienating". In the reorientation process, several speakers said that they supported increased coordination between the Department and other Secretariat departments, which would entail the need for a more "direct interface" structure. Similarly, several delegations stressed the need for the components of the Organization to speak with one voice, and in that connection they hailed the possibilities of the United Nations Communications Group for improving coordination within the system.

11. Many speakers noted that reform was a process, not an event, and that the reorientation of the Department should be characterized as a work in progress, since constant re-evaluation was necessary in any institution to meet changing needs. A number of delegations expressed their support for the Department's new focus on performance management, programme effectiveness and efficiency. They were supportive of the drive to reach out to specially targeted audiences, and to understand "customer needs" in the Department's information activities. While agreeing with the goal of creating a culture of evaluation within the Department, one speaker on behalf of a large group said that evaluations must not always be based on numbers alone, but on the overall impact of activities, especially in the developing world. Similarly, one delegation expressed the view that it was not always easy to quantify the Department's activities.

12. With regard to the proposed new "mission statement" for the Department, there were differing points of view. Several speakers supported it, while others were not convinced that it effectively captured the essence of General Assembly resolution 13 (I) of 1946. One speaker, however, strongly welcomed it. In terms of the suggested new name for the Department, two delegations expressed concern.

13. Several speakers underlined their support for the Department's working through intermediaries, such as the media, educational institutions and non-governmental organizations. One delegation focused on the importance of the Department's cooperation with non-governmental organizations, and said that they were a broad and democratic base of support within civil society for the principles and goals of the United Nations.

14. All speakers pointed to the enormous outreach possibilities opened up by the communications revolution and strongly supported the Department's embrace of new technology in all its aspects. They unanimously commended the Department for developing and enhancing the United Nations web site, which they saw as a major communications tool to extend the direct reach of the United Nations around the world. One delegation, in referring to the millions of daily "hits" on the site, characterized the progress as "remarkable". At the same time, one delegation questioned the need for DPI to employ an outside contractor to rationalize the web site, and believed that the rationalization and enhancement should be done through the Department's in-house expertise.

15. Many speakers were of the strong opinion that more must be done to improve the multilingual character of the United Nations web site and to achieve the goal of parity among all six official languages. As one speaker on behalf of a large group said, major efforts were needed to "preserve the plurality of languages" in information output. They appealed for equal treatment of all six official languages both on the Internet and in the Department's print products. One speaker said that efforts must be made in this regard "without distinction and without discrimination". Several speakers, including one on behalf of a large group, noted that the Spanish language was second to English in terms of accesses on the web site. It therefore followed that the Department must make special efforts to enhance the Spanish web site. The availability of Arabic language materials was a main concern for a number of speakers. Several speakers welcomed the achievement of the web pages in the Russian language.

16. Several delegations expressed the view that the Department should establish identical management structures for each of the language units, to enable them to develop in a more balanced way. One delegation agreed that this was necessary, including for the Chinese language. Another speaker was emphatic in asserting that one of the options which the Department was putting forward as a means towards achieving the goal of linguistic parity on the web site was unsatisfactory. While appreciating the problems involved, his delegation did not believe there was an alternative to translating all the information available on the web site in English into the other official languages. In his delegation's view, the full linguistic parity called for by the General Assembly could only be brought about by the necessary political will, and the provision of additional financial resources. On a positive note, one delegation said that the linkage of the Official Documents System with the freely accessible United Nations web site would significantly enhance the multilingual nature of the site, as well as lead to cost efficiencies. That speaker also stated that

his delegation would be proposing that the Secretary-General report to the Committee at its next session on the subject.

17. One delegation was emphatic that information sources must be reliable, and, in that context, pointed to an error on the web site relating to his country, which he said required further analysis. Another singled out for praise the Department's *CyberSchoolBus* project on the Internet, as well as the *UN Works* site. Several speakers supported the move towards creating one central Internet portal to encompass the web sites of the system.

18. Many speakers emphasized their continuing concern that the utilization of new technologies should not be at the cost of traditional means of communication, which were still the main source of information in most developing countries. In this connection, a number of delegations pointed to the importance of radio, especially in Africa, as a cost-effective and far-reaching means of outreach and, in this context, expressed their strong support for the live radio project. Several delegations said that the project should be put on a stable footing. Another speaker noted that the Department's outreach through a broadcasting arrangement in his country was reaching a record number of listeners in Africa. One delegation suggested that the time of the live broadcast in Asia be rescheduled for the convenience of that large audience. One speaker emphasized the need for a systematic evaluation of the international radio broadcasting project, especially since the General Assembly had approved it for an initial two-year period, and looked forward to the provision of detailed listenership surveys, which would help inform both the Department's and the Committee's evaluation.

19. Another speaker expressed appreciation for the taped radio programmes in Bahasa Indonesian. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a group, said that its members were pleased with the programming provided by the Caribbean Radio Unit, and at the same time called for the reinstatement of the Caribbean Magazine programme. That speaker also called again upon the Department to introduce radio programming in Creole for the Haitian public.

20. Another speaker, on behalf of a large group, said that it was important for the Department's radio and television output to take advantage of new platforms and in that regard proposed that the Secretary-General consider launching a feasibility study for a global television satellite network. One delegation denounced the aggression that it was facing from the radio and television programming of another Member State, on a daily basis on many frequencies. It was an "electronic war", which was in violation of its national sovereignty and international law.

21. A number of countries said that their delegations attached great importance to the daily press releases, issued by the Department in English and French, as they were essential to the work of those countries with small missions, whose staff were unable to attend all the daily meetings. One speaker said that they were particularly valuable to "those of us from Africa with limited resources". Several speakers also pointed to the Department's new e-mail NewsAlert, which was proving very useful to the media in their countries. A number of speakers said that their countries attached great importance to the Department's training programme for broadcasters and journalists, with one delegation noting "with surprise" the cutbacks in this programme, which would be detrimental to developing countries.

22. The Department's flagship publications, namely the *Yearbook of the United Nations* and the *United Nations Chronicle*, were of special interest to several delegations. They were in agreement that the former was of a high quality and useful as the only authoritative reference work on the Organization. There were, however, differing opinions on the latter. One speaker characterized the *Chronicle* as "stimulating and thought-provoking", while another considered that its production needed to be justified in relation to its readership and impact, and that resources might be reprogrammed elsewhere in the Department.

23. Several speakers hailed the Dag Hammarskjöld Library as the institutional memory of the Organization, and "a virtual library with world outreach", and one commended it on the attainment of its fortieth anniversary. The latter delegation, speaking on behalf of a group, praised the level of the support offered by the Library and said that the training programmes were of "immense benefit" to permanent missions at Headquarters, as well as to depository librarians in developing countries. One speaker was pleased to note that a reprioritizing of functions in the Dag Hammarskjöld Library was being contemplated, and was of the view that its technical services functions should be automated and rationalized, thereby freeing its "considerable professional expertise" to priority Secretariat-wide information support activities.

24. Many speakers pointed to the call by the General Assembly to maintain and improve activities in the areas of special interest to developing countries and those with special needs, including countries in transition. In this regard, they strongly supported the Department's alignment of its activities with the Millennium Declaration and with the major issues emphasized by the Secretary-General: poverty eradication, conflict prevention, sustainable development, the environment, human rights, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the battle against international terrorism and the needs of the African continent. They supported the advocacy and outreach activities of the Department in a number of major areas of international concern. Several said that the information work on the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations (2001), which had helped to prioritize tolerance, had been noteworthy.

25. Delegations pointed to a number of the Department's successful advocacy activities, such as those for the recent International Conference on Financing for Development, held at Monterrey, Mexico, the Second World Assembly on Ageing, held at Madrid, and in support of the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development at Johannesburg. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a group, called on DPI to coordinate the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the signing of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

26. Many delegations supported the Department's important role in the global fight against terrorism, which in their view posed a very real and dangerous threat to humanity. Several, in particular, hailed the creation of the multilingual "UN action against terrorism" page on the web site, and another suggested the creation of a world forum on how civil society and media could combat terrorism. One delegation said that in the light of the events of 11 September 2001, it was vital that the United Nations work to inform the world's people on peace, development and human rights.

27. One speaker said that the Department must prioritize its work on the Second International Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism, as people in the non-self-governing territories must be permitted to exercise their right of self-determination. Another delegation appreciated the observance of International Women's Day, which

it said had "international reverberations". One speaker called for information on the problems of the Semipalatinsk region. Several delegations expressed their appreciation to the Department for its work relating to the Chernobyl disaster and for providing objective information on its dimensions.

28. The turmoil in the Middle East and the sufferings of the Palestinian people were a major focus for a number of speakers and, in that connection, they called for the full implementation of all information activities endorsed by the General Assembly in the special information programme on the question of Palestine, until a just and lasting solution to the Palestinian question was achieved. They were of the view that those information activities on Palestine had clearly gained increased significance during the difficult times, which required enhanced efforts to shed light on the suffering of the Palestinian people subjected to occupation, their legitimate right to self-determination and the establishment of their independent state. One speaker expressed appreciation for the DPI training programme for Palestinian journalists.

29. A number of speakers, including one on behalf of a large group, were of the view that adequate information components were crucial to the success of peacekeeping missions, and should therefore be strengthened. One delegation noted approvingly that DPI had continued to provide planning and operational support to information components of peacekeeping operations and peace missions, such as those in Kosovo, Eritrea and Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, East Timor and Afghanistan. One delegation questioned the Department's request for additional resources from the support account for peacekeeping operations, and thought it should be delayed until consideration of the comprehensive review of the Department was completed.

30. Many speakers pointed to the importance they attached to the work of the information centres, which they saw as United Nations windows on the world, especially in developing countries. Several delegations also noted that the role of the centres in developing countries was particularly important, since, in the words of one speaker, "access to technology eludes the majority of the population". A number of speakers agreed that the integration of information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) should be on a case-by-case basis, taking the views of host countries into account. Another delegation expressed its appreciation for the care displayed by the Secretariat in respecting the specific criteria and guidance approved by the General Assembly for the integration of these centres. One speaker supported the United Nations houses initiative, and said that there was "ample opportunity" for better coordination, cooperation and consolidation of United Nations system-wide field offices.

31. Regarding the information centres, a number of delegations referred to the reorientation report, and to specific comments contained in it. On the subject of establishing regional hubs, several members suggested that the idea be given more thought, one suggesting it was a bit "premature". However, another delegation endorsed this proposal in areas where "linguistic commonalities facilitate regionalization". Mindful of the high costs of rental and rent-related expenses in selected developed countries, many said they supported the further study of the allocation of staff and financial resources to the centres, which would be, as one delegation described it, "a cost-benefit analysis". Some delegations referred to the possibility of redirecting resources from information centres in those developed countries where the rental costs were exceptionally high to other priority areas,

including to centres in developing countries. One speaker firmly agreed with the suggestion that practical criteria should be established with regard to the location of information centres.

32. Concerning the work of specific centres, one representative said that the activities of UNIC Tokyo were highly appreciated, and that his Government intended to make voluntary contributions to it. Several noted that the work of UNIC Islamabad was impressive, as had been notably demonstrated at the Department's informal briefing for Committee members. One delegation, in supporting the work of centres as a bridge to Governments and non-governmental organizations, pointed to the activities of UNIC Mexico City. Another pointed to the achievements of UNIC Moscow, which included translating information materials into Russian. One delegation noted "with appreciation" the role played by UNIC New Delhi.

33. One speaker said that, rather than being strengthened, the "reverse trend" had been the reality in recent years, and that a large number of centres had been closed or merged with other offices, and otherwise weakened. UNIC Dhaka was a case in point. Another delegation, on behalf of a large group, called for the establishment of the enhanced information component in the UNDP multi-island office in Kingston, Jamaica, to complement the work of UNIC Port-of-Spain.

34. At the end of the general debate, the Interim Head of the Department made a statement, in which he responded to questions raised by delegations.

Chapter IV
Consideration of the reports of the Secretary-General

35. Five reports of the Secretary-General were introduced by programme managers of the Department and considered individually. The report of the Secretary-General on the reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of public information and communications (A/AC.198/2002/2) was considered in the opening remarks of the Interim Head and later in the general debate, and therefore did not receive a separate review.

36. Concerning the report of the Secretary-General on the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations (2001) (A/AC.198/2002/3), the representative of the Department noted that, during the build-up for the Year, which culminated in the plenary meetings of the fifty-sixth session of the General Assembly (8 and 9 November 2001), it had mobilized all available resources to publicize the meetings and raise global awareness of the aims of the Year. The Department had conducted its activities in close cooperation with the Secretary-General's Personal Representative for the Year. To facilitate extensive public participation in the Year, the Department worked in close partnership with Member States and forged a broad coalition with non-governmental organizations, educational institutions and private sector bodies. The observance of the Year and the issuance of the publication of the Group of Eminent Persons, entitled "Crossing the Divide", had provided the Department of Public Information with a foundation on which to carry on the dialogue among various groups in society at all levels, from local and national to international. The United Nations continued to remain the true home of the dialogue among civilizations and, through the continuing promotion of dialogue in all parts of

the world, the Department hoped to contribute to the creation of lasting peace within and between civilizations.

37. One speaker said that the goals of the Year were to promote mutual understanding, tolerance and peaceful coexistence. The General Assembly had adopted the Global Agenda for Dialogue among Civilizations, to which all Member States attached great importance. He thanked the Department for the important contributions that it had made to publicize the Year, emphasizing that this would be a long-term campaign.

38. With regard to the report of the Secretary-General on the integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of UNDP (A/AC.198/2002/4), a representative of the Department said that it was continuing to implement the views of Member States hosting information centres integrated with the field offices of UNDP, in order to further strengthen the efficiency of public information activities. Currently there was no pending proposal to integrate any additional information centre. However, should any request be forthcoming, the Department would review it jointly with UNDP and the Government of the host country concerned, prior to submitting it to the Committee on Information for consideration.

39. Building on their 20-year working relationship, the Department and UNDP had continued to look for ways and means to improve the delivery of public information programmes and strengthen the unified image of the United Nations. They created a joint working group in September 2001 to review all aspects of cooperation in the area of public information at the field level. In addition, the Department noted that, owing to the personal efforts of the Administrator of UNDP, the United Nations resident coordinators had become increasingly attentive to the key role of information. The Department also emphasized that integration was on a case-by-case basis and was not intended to be a "one-size-fits-all" solution, and emphasized that the Secretary-General appreciated the continued support which United Nations information centres received from their host countries.

40. A representative of the Department said with reference to the integration exercise, that the General Assembly set out clear guidelines, which were contained in the annual resolution on questions relating to information, and which the Department followed carefully. In response to one delegation's specific question on paragraph 8 of the report, the representative of Department said that it should be possible to make available, as requested, the results of the review currently being conducted on the formal agreement of 1990 on cooperation between the Department and UNDP.

41. With regard to the report of the Secretary-General on the role of the Department of Public Information in United Nations peacekeeping (A/AC.198/2002/5), a representative of the Department said that, in implementation of the relevant provisions of General Assembly resolutions and working closely with the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the Department had continued to provide planning and operational support to information components of peacekeeping operations, to the extent possible. Enhancing this capacity, as supported by the Assembly, would enable the Department to contribute more effectively in these areas, as well as to efforts undertaken by mission information components to build and sustain public and governmental support for peacekeeping operations. The Department was doing its utmost, but could not do more until additional resources were forthcoming.

42. In highlighting paragraph 22 of the report, a representative of the Department said that, despite the General Assembly's endorsement of the information support functions of the Department of Public Information, the number of staff dedicated to public information in United Nations peacekeeping had remained at the same level. Several speakers noted that in that paragraph it was also stated that the report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly on requirements for funding under the support account for peacekeeping operations for the period from 1 July 2002 to 30 June 2003 would include a provision for additional resources for the Department of Public Information for "backstopping peacekeeping operations". One delegation asked if there was any more specific information available on this, and another asked if resources could be transferred from the Department of Peacekeeping Operations to the Department of Public Information. Another delegation commended the information support for the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone as an example of a good programme for peace-building.

43. A representative of the Department introduced the report of the Secretary-General on the continued development, maintenance and enrichment of the United Nations web site in the six official languages (A/AC.198/2002/6) and explained that it was the fifth in a series addressing this issue. There were two courses of action being suggested for consideration. Action 1 called for replicating all materials on the English web site in the other language sites. Action 2 would allow the web sites to develop independently in each language on the basis of the resource capacities of author departments and offices, and was being recommended for approval. The Department noted that replicating all materials would require substantial resources, although the situation would be much improved if the *United Nations Treaty Series* were to be exempted. It was clear, however, that the achievement of the goal of linguistic parity would be a long-range project. The representative of the Department noted, on a positive note, that the introduction of more automated methods of translation in the future could "dramatically" reduce translation costs, as the technology developed.

44. One delegation stated that, in its view, the proposed action 2 was a continuation of the status quo, and the disparity was increasing. In its view, action 1 was the only real solution, and it was hoped that the Committee would support it, although there could be room for some compromise. Several speakers pointed to the continuing need to implement paragraph 57 of General Assembly resolution 56/64 B, in which the Assembly called for an equitable distribution of financial and human resources within the Department allocated to the United Nations web site among all official languages on a continuous basis. The Department provided the clarification that, in terms of the structure of web site management in the Department, there was an equitable distribution of resources in web site management, while programming and design were common among the languages. However, resources for content creation were not equitably allocated in the budget. The web site was a "storefront" and, before full language parity could be achieved, the content had first to be created in other author areas.

45. A representative of the Department introduced the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Joint United Nations Information Committee in 2001 (A/AC.198/2002/7), and highlighted some of the key elements of the twenty-seventh session of the Committee, held at Geneva in July 2001 at the headquarters of the World Intellectual Property Organization. It was noted that, in October 2001, as part of its review, the Administrative Committee on Coordination, now renamed the

United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, decided to do away with its permanent subsidiary bodies. As a result, as from January 2002, inter-agency coordination would be carried out through a new informal and flexible mechanism, the United Nations Communications Group. The Department said that the Committee on Information would be kept fully apprised of inter-agency cooperation in the field of public information, although the reporting obligation, per se, no longer applied. It was expected that these new arrangements for inter-agency coordination in the field of communications would contribute to building a culture of communications within the United Nations system.